

Sermon: The Celebration of Trinity Sunday

This morning's Gospel reading is one of the most quoted passages in the Bible. When I was looking ahead last month to the plans for the next few months, I thought alright, I am not going to be here to preach on Pentecost, but Trinity Sunday is the next week. But not only was it Trinity Sunday, it was Father's Day and we were going to celebrate Communion. I thought that I would just follow the lectionary readings that the Presbyterian Common Lectionary uses, as do many churches do all over the world.

One of the great things about it is that it gives us readings that we might not otherwise choose to use in church so that we hear more of the stories of our faith. One of the not so great things about the lectionary is that it gives us the readings that we might not choose to use in church; the ones we might rather avoid. I chose to venture off from the lectionary today, and this is one of those weeks that maybe I might have wanted to avoid this reading.

Today's reading is so often used by the more conservative churches for the support for the language of being born again, being a "born again Christian." Also in that same passage is the phrase well used to promote an exclusive Christian agenda.

I've seen parts of this amazing lectionary passage more often used in harsh and judgemental ways, than as a doorway of invitation. Physically, we don't enter the world as adults; likewise with spiritual birth. The fact that we don't start out full-formed in our faith ought to check any impulse to be overly judgmental about where we and others are on the journey. Seeking to grow up, and to grow deep, we should always seek out those who are wiser, those who are more practiced in this growing thing than we are, even as we hold the spiritual door open for others. This passage compels us toward humility and hospitality.

From conception to delivery and beyond, the process of birth is intimate work. A lot of it happens in the dark, figuratively as well as literally. So it seems especially appropriate that Nicodemus and Jesus have this conversation at night, not just because the darkness offers a measure of

protection and secrecy for Nicodemus, away from the eyes of his fellow Pharisees, but because Jesus speaks here of a mystery. So much easier, sometimes, to talk in the shadowed hours, when the questions that the day has kept at bay can now steal forth, and the people who might judge are not present to see, and in the cloistering dark we can speak of what is intimate and eternal.

In response to the question that Nicodemus asks about being born anew, Jesus does not really provide a clear explanation. Yet in his words about water and Spirit, about birthing and love, Jesus offers something better than an explanation: he extends to Nicodemus, and to us, an invitation to a relationship and to a journey of transformation.

“The wind blows where it chooses,” Jesus says to Nicodemus in that nighttime visit, “and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Perhaps it was this quality of the Spirit that inspired Christian folk in Celtic lands to choose the wild goose as an image of the Holy Spirit. Unpredictable, untamed, the goose flies in formation with its companions, offering strength that makes the arduous journey easier.

Also in that same passage is “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” This verse gets a lot of attention.

When people quote this Bible verse it is often not intended as a message of the unconditional love of God, but usually is intended in divisive ways, pointing to the exclusivity of the way to salvation.

This passage in John is used in the lectionary for Trinity Sunday because it is one of the passages in the Bible that the doctrine of the Trinity is based on. It refers to all three parts of the Trinity – to God, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

I’ve been told by some going through the interview process to be approved for ministry, that they were asked, “What would you preach on Trinity

Sunday?” I thought it was a strange question but have come to realize that it is a difficult concept to grasp, which is why I guess they ask that question.

The way I see it – the Trinity is all about perspective. The person of Jesus gives us a window into what God is like, an example of how to live our lives. The Holy Spirit is God working with us and among us. Since doing a little more thinking and more reading about the concept of the Trinity, it seems to me that to explain God as the Trinity, inherently describes God as communal and loving.

At the heart of the understanding of God as Trinity, is the notion that we can't fully understand God without talking about relationship.

One God in three persons whose shared, mutual, and sacrificial love spills out into the world and all its inhabitants. And I think that, ultimately, we are called to be church in a similar way. Loving, respecting, and caring for each other in a way that spills out into our neighborhoods and communities in tangible, beneficial, and attractive ways.

At the heart of our understanding of God as somehow three-in-one is the notion that you can't fully or finally understand God without talking about relationship.

On Trinity Sunday, we both celebrate God's triune nature and also acknowledge the great mystery that it holds. Throughout the centuries, theologians have tried to define just how it is that God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit dwell together and with all of creation. There are many symbols of the Trinity, from a simple triangle, to a Celtic Trinity knot ... to some more curious artwork.

It is sometimes difficult to separate the doing of the Trinity from the being of the Trinity, for it is part of the nature of the Trinity to be in action, to work in relationship within itself and in cooperation with creation.

The Trinity is not merely an idea to be grasped but a mystery to be experienced and a relationship to be entered into. This is supported in today's Gospel reading in the story of the nighttime visit that Nicodemus makes to Jesus. In Jesus' responses to the questions Nicodemus poses

about being “born from above,” we see that while understanding is important and something to be worked toward (“Are you a teacher of Israel,” Jesus asks of Nicodemus, “and yet you do not understand these things?”), what Christ desires most for us to grasp is the love of God: the love that sent Christ into the world to show us the face of God; the love that claims us and calls us; the love that invites us to enter into relationship with the One who dwells in mystery yet seeks to know us in the midst of everyday life; the love that drenches us and draws us into new life.

God is so full of love that there has to be some way of talking about that love shared in and through profound relationships. But the Trinity goes even further, saying that from the very beginning of time the dynamic power of love that is at the heart of God’s identity and character can only be captured by thinking of the love that is shared.

And so God’s essential and core being has always been a giving and receiving and sharing of love that finally spills out into the whole of the universe and invites all of us into it. First through creation and God’s series of covenants, then in the sending of God’s Son to show us in word and deed just how much God loves us, and now as the Spirit bears witness to God’s ongoing love for us and all creation.

In the coming days and weeks—and in these moments, here and now—how will you look for the presence of the God who seeks you with constant love? How will you be in relationship with others and show them this same love? May we at all times and in all ways, live out of this love.

My blessing for you all, for Trinity Sunday, is in this new season may you know the presence of the God who dwells within your days, the mystery of the Christ who drenches you in love, the blessing of the Spirit who bears you into life anew. Amen.